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ABSTRACT

Most American-born (or native) blacks think of Afro-Caribbean women as clannish, thrifty to the point of greed, constant strivers, uninvolved in civil rights and women's rights activities, and believing in stereotypes of native blacks' inferiority. These images are tied to the Afro-Caribbean woman's immigrant status. As a foreigner, she constantly strives for financial security and to achieve goals which were the motives of immigration. The Afro-Caribbean woman has little time for or understanding of community activities. She develops most of her images from the media and believes that through hard work, the "American Dream" can be hers or her children's. Early socialization also influences her images. On arrival, she lives in poor black or Hispanic neighborhoods and has a low-status job. These facts, coupled with exposure to the belief that the city is to be feared, lead her to fear her neighbors. Divide-and-rule tactics in the workplace often reinforce the belief that she is superior to American-born blacks. Furthermore, ignorance of American segregation patterns leads to actions which a native black might not even consider. Thus, conflicts and misunderstandings arise between native blacks and Afro-Caribbean women because each has images of the other which do not coincide with reality. (CMG)

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AFRO-CARIBBEAN WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES:
IMAGES AND REALITY

Perhaps for more than any other group of women, images of Afro-Caribbean women in the United States do not coincide with reality. All the images are affected by the triple realities which these women face --black, female and immigrants in a nativistic society which has traditionally thought little of blacks and women.

By its very definition however, the term "Afro-Caribbean women" contributes to this disparity between image and reality because it evokes the image of a homogenous group and tends to lump them all together in a uniform group of women. But it is difficult to perceive Afro-Caribbean women in the United States as a group since the term used is a short-cut one and describes only those women in the United States who share a common regional origin. Moreover, these women have dispersed throughout the United States, and even when they congregate in large cities like New York and Boston, they cut across all classes and occupations, thus their American experiences are not similar. It is also difficult to arrive at anything like accurate statistics about the number involved since many are here illegally. Moreover, the majority of Afro-Caribbean women in the United States are recent arrivals, their entry into the United States eased by the 1965 Immigration Bill. Immigration after 1965 has been described as "female initiated, involving women who have high rates of participation in the labor markets of the host society and it, in contrast

to past migrations, often involves women who leave established households and children behind."[1] These women come to the United States to establish beachheads for their families because women can find jobs easier than men.

Because of these paradoxes, the term Afro-Caribbean women in this context would refer to those women who emigrated to the United States from the English-speaking Caribbean islands. This paper would emphasize that though these women differ from each other in their islands of origin, they share general experiences, desires and mores which set them apart from any other group of women in the United States. Many of the comments would be confined to generalities developed by asking some basic questions: What images do Americans have of Afro-Caribbean women? Do these images co-incide with reality? What images do Afro-Caribbean women have of America and Americans? How do these images affect their behavior? The generalities thus developed will explain how much misconceptions and limited knowledge contribute to the formation of images as well as show how traditional values and attitudes shape these images.

What images do Americans have of Afro-Caribbean women? Most think of them as clannish females, constant strivers, uninvolved in the concerns of civil rights or female rights and imbued with the psychology of their former white British masters to consider Black Americans as inferior to them. In many ways, the images are the same as those held of the Afro-Caribbean male. Ira deA. Reid in his monumental study of The Negro Immigrant lists sixteen of the commonly perceived stereotypes which were applied to people from the Caribbean. Although he used the generic term "he" to describe them, many of these perceptions were, and still are, held

of the Afro-Caribbean female. Among the most noteworthy are "clannish," "over-sensitivity," a "trouble maker with white people", and a "feeling of superiority".[2] Gilbert Osofsky in a later work, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto corroborates the existence of these stereotypes. He comments: "As a group, West Indians became noted for their ambition, thrift and business acumen. They were called 'pushy', 'the Jews of the race', 'crafty', 'clannish'."[3] Harold Cruse portrays some of these very images in his book The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. He quotes a woman jazz singer who accuses Afro-Caribbeans of playing "a two-faced, underhanded role with white people in undercutting American negroes." He further concluded that "the stereotype of American-negro inferiority is so strong among many West Indians that to them, an extra intelligent American negro either has distant West Indian antecedents, or else the ability to 'think like a West Indian'."[4] Today, the same images of Afro-Caribbean women exist and they have been given added life by the increasing number of female immigrants who have come to the United States from the Caribbean since 1965.

To try to decide whether these images co-incide with reality, one needs to consider not only the island background of these women, but also the fact that they are strangers in a strange land. Their immigrant status contributes to a certain amount of insecurity--fear of the future and distance from significant others who could provide psychological and physical support. This insecurity leads to frugality which Afro-Caribbean consider thrift but which evokes the image of greed in those who do not perceive the reality of her situation. The need to have a

substantial financial background is perceived by these women as an urgent one. Thus, money must be saved even from the smallest wages to provide financial independence in a foreign land where the vast networks of family and friends, so familiar in their native islands, do not exist. Money must also be secured for the proverbial "rainy day." For the Afro-Caribbean women in the United States, there is no alternative to being thrifty. It is necessary for their survival and the survival of those who depend on them. Coming as they have from poor countries with little social services, Afro-Caribbean women are used to living on small sums of money and the frugal life which some assume in the United States imposes no real burden on them. As a matter of fact, the frugality is only the means to some clearly defined end.

There is often another vital reason for the excessive thrift of the Afro-Caribbean women. They need the money not only for their financial independence in this country, but also to satisfy accrued debts and obligations in their native islands. In the Caribbean tradition, debts are to be avoided. However, in order to come to the United States, many women have to make heavy financial investments--money is needed for travel, new clothes, luggage and arrangements for taking care of those to be left behind. When these women arrive in the United States, they must obtain a job--any job, quite quickly. They cannot afford to be choosy about the type or place of employment because their creditors will not wait and the family back home cannot postpone eating. In addition to this, most Afro-Caribbean women think that debts must be eliminated as quickly as possible. Moreover, obligations to family are strongly felt.

One writer asserts that "West Indians of all classes regard children as blessings. Proud to give birth, happy to cherish babies, ready to make sacrifices for a child's future, parents look forward to support and companionship in old age."[5] It is to fulfill the obligations to family and to satisfy debts that Afro-Caribbean women are even more thrifty.

Most of the Afro-Caribbean women in the United States, especially those who emigrated after 1965 have some technical skill demanded by the American economy. However, many of the jobs which they take are either low paying and/or low status by American standards or else cannot be filled because the local female population is either unwilling or unable to perform such tasks. The Afro-Caribbean woman is often unaware that some jobs e.g nurses or secretaries are considered low status occupations in the United States. What she does know is that these jobs pay her considerably more than she would have earned in her native island. As a matter of fact, many Afro-Caribbean women who are in the United States illegally or temporarily, often take jobs with which they are ashamed to be identified e.g. domestic or factory hand, because even such low status occupations pay higher wages than the professions "back home."

In the position of low status, and often low wage earning employee, Afro-Caribbean women do not perceive of themselves as victims; instead these jobs are seen as means to an end. Paule Marshall, in Brown Girl, Brown Stones, captures the essence of this perception. She describes Barbadian women domestics in Brooklyn who were taunted because of their race on their way to clean and scrub the floors of white

folks whose "only thought was of the 'few raw mout pennies' at the end of the day which would eventually 'buy house'."[6] Coming as they have from agrarian societies where the ownership of property is associated with economic security and high status, these women are ambitious to acquire property either in the United States or in their birth places. All the scrimping and saving epitomizes this passion for home ownership.

Afro-Caribbean women in the United States are often perceived as ambitious because a significant number of them can be found in professional occupations. This fact redounds on the prevailing attitudes and values of the Caribbean area. The need for a sound education has always been emphasized in the Caribbean. In this fact, they are considerably more fortunate than their native sisters who have often been subjected to inferior education in circumstances which hampered learning. The European colonizers in the Caribbean declared education a determinant of social mobility, and blacks who took over the leadership of the islands have been even more emphatic. Parents too, have drilled into the heads of their children the need for a sound education. It is no wonder then, that in the United States, Afro-Caribbean women have been so quick to take advantage of every educational opportunity--if not for themselves, surely for their children. Shirley Chisholm, the former United States congresswoman, herself the beneficiary of these Caribbean values and traditions, confirms that: "The Barbadians who came to Brooklyn all wanted, and most of them got, the same two things: a brownstone house and a college education for their children."[7] The same could be said of those who came from the other islands.

The image that Afro-Caribbean women feel superior to Afro-Americans is portrayed by many writers. Roi Ottley attributes this dominant group psychology to the fact that Afro-Caribbeans come from countries "where the great majority of the people are black."[8] To leave islands where blacks are in the majority for a country where they are in the minority can be quite traumatic, But even more important is the fact that Afro-Caribbean women have a new perception of color in the United States. It is not that racism does not exist in their native lands, but that "it often differs categorically, manifests itself differently, and may not have the same order of importance or salience as that practiced in the United States."[9] Thus, Afro-Caribbean women, when confronted with certain racial issues react differently to native Americans. The differences between these two groups of women in their perception of the white world should not be an indictment of any group, but simply an explanation of their psychology which arose from different national conditions.

A further image of the Afro-Caribbean women in the United States is that of individuals who are minimally involved in political and social organizations in their adopted country. As a matter of fact, many of the earlier references used the term "clannish" to describe this behavior. Many factors account for this behavior pattern. As immigrants, Afro-Caribbean women seek mutual support and security in an alien world; homesickness also helps them to discover common backgrounds, problems and aspirations. Thus an Afro-Caribbean community is forged in American cities--a kind of unity it is interesting to note, which does not exist in the Caribbean. But this seeking out of others who share the same

background is not peculiar to Afro-Caribbean women. Chinese have their Chinatowns in almost every American city and Americans living overseas usually establish similar communities. Moreover, Afro-Caribbean women do not get involved in American political and social organizations because they, as foreigners, have no relationship to the power structure of the United States and because, in most cases, they do not even understand how the political system works.

For an even greater number, non-involvement in American affairs is a conscious act. The vast numbers of illegal aliens fear that any involvement will reveal their illegal status and result in deportation. Others are so involved in pursuing their goals of education or making money that there is neither time nor need for other involvement. For an even larger number, they refuse to become involved because of the realization that they may, if things do not work out in the United States, return to the land of their birth. Because few of them do, a large number of Afro-Caribbean women in the United States live in a state of limbo--neither here in the United States nor there in the Caribbean.

Many of the behavior patterns of Afro-Caribbean women in the United States are shaped by images which were perceived even before arrival in this country. American radio and television shows flood the Caribbean airwaves. It is possible to keep up with the American "Top Forty" pop tunes and to follow the activities of "Dallas", "Magnum P.I.", and "The Love Boat" in the Caribbean. Caribbean newspapers carry a great deal of American fare including the comic strips so familiar to Americans like "Dick Tracy", and "Mary Worth". Most of the movies

seen in the Caribbean are made in Hollywood and the cultural messages imbedded in these movies tell what's in, and on, in America. The images are also shaped by popular black American magazines like Jet and Ebony as well as some of the more popular women's magazines like McCall's and Better Homes and Gardens.

It is from these various media sources that Afro-Caribbean women get their images of America and Americans. All the media tell stories which are, in reality fantasies about the American Dream--that persistent cultural myth told in many forms about America's search for and presumed destiny to realize moral and material prosperity and to achieve individual and collective happiness. These images are so real that Afro-Caribbean women firmly believe that the American Dream could also be their's. Even in the face of reality, many only reluctantly yield the fantasy of the image preferring instead to avoid or ignore the contradictory claims of others' alleged realities. They work hard, save money, live right, and believe that if they do not "make it" in this country, surely their children will.

The images evoked by Afro-Caribbean women of America and Americans are also the result of socialization in the United States. Relatives and friends, newspapers and television tell them that the city is a place to be feared. When one considers the population of the neighborhoods where they live on first coming to the United States, the jobs they take and the routes they use, the fears of these women are often directed to the native black and hispanic strangers they meet in hallways, subways and streets. Moreover, many Afro-Caribbean women in the United States find

themselves as pawns in a divide-and-conquer practice often encountered in the workplace. The Afro-Caribbean women are often told that they are different from and hence, better than native blacks and are often given preferential treatment because of this. Afro-Caribbean women in the United States often do not realize that very often, the person who is deciding who is the better black is himself an immigrant who has been in the United States for a much shorter period than the native blacks whom he so fully criticises. Nevertheless, many Afro-Caribbean women use their differences from the native blacks to support the superior/inferior images which are so detrimental to the unity of all black people in America.

But the Afro-Caribbean woman also has some images of America and Americans which are shaped by her limited knowledge of the society. Afro-Caribbean women often come to the United States with little knowledge of American prohibitions surrounding public conduct with whites. "The West Indian comes to New York with a supreme advantage," writes a Trinidadian, namely ignorance of American patterns of segregation. "Unaccustomed to the social mores . . . (she) goes out . . . and swings through every door."[10] So without planning to, she breaks barriers and destroys streotypes by her very niavete and unabashed aggression and often establishes a kind of relationship with whites which the native blacks do not have. Because the racist walls of Jericho seem to crumble at the blast of her trumpet, the Afro-Caribbean woman in the United States find it difficult to understand why native blacks cannot do the same things which she does. Many do not understand that their background as well as

ignorance of societal mores predispose them to behave in ways which would perhaps not even be considered by the native blacks.

Many of the conflicts and misunderstandings which arise between Afro-Caribbean women and native blacks arise beacuse each has images of the other which do not coincide with reality. Differences in cultural background make each side view the same things differently. Afro-Caribbean women develop most of their images from the American media. Images of optimistic order dramatize their fantasies about American society. The images are further affected by the behavior of the members of the host society with whom they first come into contact. Moreover, the images are affected by the society of their native islands and the failure to recognize that many cultural differences exist and what is acceptable in one society is taboo in another.

The images which Americans have of the Afro-Caribbean woman are affected by her immigrant status. As a foreigner, she constantly strives for financial security and to achieve goals which were the raison d'etre for immigration. There is no time nor need to involve herself in community activities and the Afro-Caribbean women can ask like the psalmist: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" For some, there will be no adjustment to life in the United States; their birth lands remain their mental places for life.

There is no reason why different perceptions of each other should continue to drive wedges between Afro-Caribbean women and Afro-Americans. In a society where all are black and policies do not differentiate among blacks in housing, jobs etc., divisiveness only facilitates exploitation

of all. Although Afro-Caribbean women operate under more levels of cross pressures in the American society--as blacks, females, and foreigners, they must join with Afro-Americans to erase the negative images which they have of each other and as blacks and Americans they both must work to improve their collective situation. In order to begin removing the imaccurate images, each group must go about defining itself, its goals and its perceptions. The system of self definition is required because a number of the images, on both sides, have been created by what others have said or thought. The urgent need for self definition is best characterized by the folktale of the slave, Dave, who decided to leave the plantation after he had been freed. As long as Dave was in sight, massa stood on the porch hollering: "Dave! The children love you. I love you, and missy, she like you. But remember, Dave! You still a nigger!" Dave would holler back "Yassuh", but he kept right on stepping until he got to Canada. Even though massa had let Dave's body go free, he still wanted to keep his spirit a slave by yelling "Remember you still a nigger." People aren't free as long as they let others tell them who they are. Afro-Caribbean men and women and Afro-American men and women must be like Dave. They have to begin stepping and not listen to what is yelled after them. They must keep on stepping for by combining energies and numbers in the United States, political effectiveness will be enhanced.

Footnotes

[1]Judith Burgess and Meryl James-Gray, "Migration and Sex Roles: A Comparison of Black and Indian Trinidadians in New York City" in Delores Mortimer and Roy S. Bryce-LaPorte (eds.), Female Immigrants to the United States: Caribbean, Latin American and African Experiences (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Inst., 1981), p. 87.

[2]Ira DeA. Reid, The Negro Immigrant (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1939), p. 108.

[3]Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 133.

[4]Harold Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1967), p. 424.

[5]David Lowenthal, West Indian Societies (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 107.

[6]Paule Marshall, Brown Girl, Brown Stones (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 11.

[7]Shirley Chisholm, Unbought and Unbossed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), p. 5.

[8]Roi Ottley, New World A-Coming (New York: Arno, 1968), p. 68.

[9]Roy Bryce-LaPorte, "Black Immigrants: The Experience of Invisibility and Inequality" Journal of Black Studies Sept. 1972, p.40.

[10]Lennox Raphael, "West Indians and Afro Americans," Freedomways 4: 3, Summer 1964, p. 445.